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ABSTRACT

Japanese children are socialized to internalize parental, group, and institutional norms. Japanese adults believe "good" children to be sunao (cooperative). Sunao is difficult to translate into English, but can be thought of as being gentle and spirited. This paper presents a study that examined and described feelings and thoughts of Japanese children, their parents, and their teachers about sunao in a school setting. The kindergarten selected for this study was located in Kawasaki city, a middle class suburb near Tokyo. It was a traditional Japanese kindergarten and as such involved considerable group work. Children worked together on projects. At times the classes seemed to represent a single entity rather than a collection of individuals. The following themes emerged from analysis of the data: (1) sunao as a fundamental characteristic of the child; (2) sunao as both a positive and negative concept depending upon the use; and (3) sunao as a result of how the child is treated by others. Of the 60 children in the study, 56 understood sunao to be a positive attitude. Of the 69 adults, 26 defined sunao as honesty. Thirty of the 69 adults considered sunao to be a part of the whole child who is able to keep interpersonal harmony within a group situation. Sunao as behavior also can be seen two ways: being sunao to one's self and being sunao to others. The paper reports that sunao is one of the fundamental characteristics of the child: it affects their very being; how they behave and what they feel. Adults try to foster sunao through communication, modeling, and praise. Contains 17 references. (DK)

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The Internalization of Values: Adopting Cooperation (Sunao) in Japanese Preschools

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Abstract

Japanese children are socialized to internalize parental, group, and institutional norms. Japanese adults believe "good" children to be sunao (cooperative). Sunao can be thought of as being gentle and spirited. In this study, we examined and described feelings and thoughts of Japanese children, their parents, and their teachers about sunao in a school setting. We found that sunao is one of the fundamental characteristics of the child: it affects their very being; how they behave and what they feel. Adults try to foster sunao through communication, modeling, and praise.

"What makes them such good children?" asked the 8-year-old son of Merry White (1987) when he observed the behavior of Japanese children at school. White, an expert in Japanese education, claimed that Japanese parents and teachers generally consider the moral and behavioral attributes of the child to be characteristics of the "good" child (1987). Both Shigaki (1983) and Lewis (1984) described the Japanese child's moral qualities as his or her abilities to be sunao (cooperative), otonashii (gentle and mild), akarui (bright eyed), genki (active, spirited and energetic) and so on. Ugai (1988) claimed that parents in Japan generally assert that children who are sunao, otonashii, and listen well to and understand their parents are ii (good) children. Because some studies (e.g., Lewis, 1986; Nakane, 1972; Vogel, 1963, 1979) found that Japanese children strongly internalize parental, group, and institutional values, an examination of this sunao concept could contribute to our understanding of the child's internalization of values.

Japanese generally treasure sunao in children because it fosters their skills in interpersonal harmony and also prevents them from causing trouble for others (Lebra 1976). To paraphrase Lebra, the merit of being sunao is inculcated as a most praiseworthy attribute. White (1987) described a sunao child as "a good participant in group activities, a good listener to adults, a good replicator of society's norms and standards" (p. 185). Maizawa (1988), a Japanese educational counselor, insisted that although adults want all children to be sunao and iikotachi (good children), they do not want to raise children to be automatons without will. Instead, children should be free to be themselves at home, then, when in a group situation, they can work with others harmoniously.

The concept of sunao is almost impossible to adequately translate into English (White & LeVine, 1986). The frequent translation of the word by some western researchers as meaning obedience may not convey the true essence of the word because sunao consists of a cluster of traits that include open-mindedness, truthfulness, nonresistance, straightforwardness, mildness, and so on (White & LeVine, 1986). Although the concept of sunao was explained by some western researchers (e.g., Lewis, 1984; Peak, 1991; White, 1987; White & LeVine, 1986), none of the existing studies about sunao examined the feelings and thoughts of children, their parents or their teachers toward this concept. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine and describe the concepts of sunao from the viewpoint of children themselves. A secondary purpose was to broaden the children's views with

several adult samples (teachers, parents, and college professors).

Methodology

Information about sunao came from children, teachers, parents, and professors, all of whom were associated with a traditional Japanese kindergarten. Kotloff (1993) described a traditional kindergarten in Japan as encouraging group activity and cooperation. The kindergarten selected for this study is located in Kawasaki city, a middle-class suburb near Tokyo. It is known to us and has been described in detail elsewhere (Lichtman & Taylor, 1993; Taylor, Rogers, & Lichtman, in press). Just as Kotloff characterized traditional Japanese kindergartens, this kindergarten involves considerable group work. Children work together on projects; at times the classes seem to represent a single entity rather than a collection of individuals.

We chose several types of informants in order to understand the concept of sunao. A primary informant group was the children at the kindergarten. We selected sixty children (32 girls and 29 boys) who, on the average, were six-and-a-half years old. (It should be noted that this is a typical age for kindergarten students in Japan who, unlike in the United States, do not enroll in elementary school until they are between the ages of six and one half to seven). The children's mothers were a second informant group and we were able to interview 56 of them. We also interviewed eight teachers at the kindergarten and five college professors of early childhood education from the Tokyo area who were associated with the school.

The first author interviewed all informants individually, took notes in Japanese, and subsequently interpreted them into English. Two Japanese educational psychologists reviewed and verified the translations. A typical interview with a child lasted about 15 minutes. Following is a partial list of questions that the children responded to: "Tell me what sunao means to you"; "Tell me if you have ever been told by someone that you are sunao"; "Tell me how you feel if someone says that you are not sunao"; "Tell me how you feel if there are no sunao children in the classroom." Interviews with adults followed a similar format and lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. The questions for adults included the following: "Tell me about your concept of sunao"; "Tell me your thoughts about sunao children"; "Tell me if you think that children should be sunao"; "Tell me how we can promote sunao in children."

The data were translated into English then analyzed according to McCracken's five stages of the qualitative data analysis (1988). In the first stage, we read each statement with no concern for its relationship to other aspects of the text. In the second stage, we read each statement again and again to be familiar with the transcript. In the third stage, we began watching for patterns and themes to develop. In the fourth stage, among themes, patterns, similarities, and contradictions, we selected relevant material and discarded irrelavent material. And finally, in the fifth stage, we brought together the themes from each interview and unified them under the umbrella of the culture being studied and related them back to the review of literature.

Results

The following themes emerged from our analysis of the data: sunao as a fundamental characteristic of the child; sunao as both a positive and negative concept depending upon the use; and sunao as a result of how the child is treated by others. We will discuss these themes accordingly.

The concept of sunao as a fundamental characteristic of children seems to be related to how they are, how they behave, and how they feel when they are told by adults that they are or are not being sunao. Both the children and adults explained their concepts of sunao as being the characteristics of a person who is gentle or honest and who is able to maintain interpersonal harmony when interacting with others. When the children were asked what being sunao meant, they invariably replied that it means being yasashii (gentle, mild, kind). There was a remarkable consensus that sunao was understood by 56 of the 60 children to be a positive attitude. One boy gave his definition of sunao without hesitation, "Being bright and yasashii (gentle)." A similar response came from another boy, "It's the same as being bright and being an iiko (good child)." An active girl responded cheerfully, "it means you are kind!" Another girl voiced her opinion, "The child who doesn't do bad things."

Of the 69 adults, 26 defined sunao as honesty. They asserted that sunao people are honest, and because of their honesty they are able to express their feelings even if they make mistakes. One mother noted, "Sunao includes honesty. If you are honest, you don't lie because you are being sunao to yourself." Another mother affirmed, "Sunao means that you express your thoughts honestly. When you find your mistakes, you are able to admit them honestly and apologize." A mother of a boy reported, "A sunao child is an iiko (good child), isn't

he?" The school's director elucidated, "To me, sunao and morality are complimentary. Sunao means being honest to yourself as well as to others."

Thirty of the 69 adults considered sunao to be a part of the whole child who is able to keep interpersonal harmony within a group situation. One professor of early childhood education commented in this way:

> Children who have been accepted as they are tend to be sunao. It depends on both the children's developmental stages and their development of the self. Only when children can establish the self, and when this self and aggression are accepted by adults, can they become sunao. When adults ignore the child's development of self, sunao can not be nurtured.

The mother of a boy claimed, "Sunao is an important part of the child's personality development. I want him to become a person who can accept others' opinions and understand their pains as well." Another mother said, "I think that sunao is a basic component of being a whole person when interacting with people. When we get older, we begin to behave differently and we tend to not be as sunao to others." She continued, "I would hope that we could continue to be sunao and still be free to be ourselves even after we get older." Another mother of a girl said, "Being sunao means that my daughter can maintain harmonious relationships with her peers and teachers at school as well as with us at home." Toshio Tatsumi, a renowned educational psychologist, summed up this notion of sunao as being a part of the whole child by saying:

> Children in the "normal" family are usually sunao until the age of three. After this age, children begin to cultivate different personalities, abilities, traits and special talents. When the development of the self begins, children may cease to be sunao to their parents, and when this happens, we need to recognize that their independence is maturing. At this time in their lives, we need to give them freedom and communicate with them in ways that nurture their growth into whole persons (T. Tatsumi, personal communication, July 10, 1993).

In terms of sunao as behavior, of the 60 children, 35 interpreted sunao as doing something good such as helping their parents at home. One girl commented, "Being sunao means helping my parents by doing things at home, like putting away my computer." A very energetic girl gave a spontaneous response when she said,

"Helping my mom!" One girl summed up the meaning of sunao as doing something good, saying, "It means being friendly to everyone and being helpful to my mother because it is sad if she has to do all the work by herself."

Sunao as behavior can also be seen two ways: being sunao to one's self and being sunao to others. When people are sunao to themselves, they act according to their own will in spite of the feelings of others. However, when they are sunao to others, they will internalize the values of others and act accordingly. The head teacher observed:

> I think we use the word, sunao, in two ways; We may praise children for listening to us and doing things for us in which case we say, 'Thank you for being sunao'...on the other hand we may say to children, 'Can't you be sunao and listen?'...Hence, the word is used in both positive and negative ways.

The school director's comments further demonstrated this concept:

> I think we can understand sunao in two ways. For instance, sunao means that you are being honest to your heart. Thus the suano of a three-year-old boy would be his way of expressing only his needs and just doing what he wants. This is one way of understanding the meaning...on the other hand, an older boy may be able to listen to, internalize the needs of others, and cooperate with them. I think this is another kind of sunao.

Thus, sunao seems to depend on the child's ability to understand others' points of views because younger children tend to act according to their own will while not recognizing the needs of others, while older children are more capable of listening to and internalizing the needs and values of others. This concept of empathy also appears to be related to the principles that Piaget (1967) pointed out many years ago. According to him, young children are not able to cooperate because of their egocentricity, but as they develop, they can learn cooperation by interacting with other people.

In terms of sunao as a behavioral concept, of the 69 adults, 42 defined sunao as the ability to listen to others and internalize their values without sacrificing one's own beliefs. One teacher reported, "It means that we

listen, understand, internalize the opinions or suggestions of others, and then act upon them according to our own will without losing our own convictions." The mother of a girl observed, "Sunao means that my child not only has her own will but that she can also internalize the values of others by listening and understanding." Another mother of a girl commented, "Sunao means that under any circumstances, we listen to the opinions of others, try to understand them, and integrate their opinions into our thinking, thus, we can do things for others and help them when necessary." Another mother of a boy said, "Sunao means having ears to listen to others, but of course, I hope that my child has his own opinions as well."

This concept of sunao described by the adults as the ability to listen to and internalize others' values supports the notions of sunao delineated by White and LeVine (1986). They assert that a child who is sunao "...has not yielded his or her personal autonomy for the sake of cooperation; cooperation does not suggest giving up the self...it implies that working with others is the appropriate way of expressing and enhancing the self" (White & LeVine, 1986, p. 58).

Regarding the children's feelings about sunao, most of them replied that they would feel sad if they were told to be sunao. It appeared that the children understand that being sunao voluntarily is a positive thing but having to be told to be so is not, the inference being that they are not already so. Out of 60 children, 55 responded that they feel very happy when someone tells them that they are sunao. One girl said, "I feel happy and thankful."

Thirteen children, on the other hand, when asked how they felt when they were requested to be sunao responded that it made them feel sad. A boy commented, "I felt sad." One girl reported, "I cried!" Another boy responded, "Hanseishita (I reflected my faults and tried to do better)." Additionally, when they were asked how they felt if there were no sunao children in the classroom, 30 of the children responded that it made them sad. A shy girl voiced her opinion softly, "It makes me sad because I can't play anymore." A very active boy exclaimed, "It makes me sad and I cry!" Another boy said, "It's sad and I have to find more children who are sunao."

Sunao seemed to be related to the ways adults treat their children and the adults communicated their

methods of fostering sunao in their children as follows: Always listen to children, be sunao to them, and praise their accomplishments. Out of the 69 adults, 29 reported that they listen to children in earnest when conversing with them. The head teacher explained, "I make myself available to my children and listen to them attentively when they talk. I try to maintain a safe and comfortable atmosphere in which they can come and talk openly with me." The mother of a boy stated, "I try not to force my opinions on my child, instead I listen to his words carefully. Sometimes he might say things that really do not make sense but still I pay attention to what he is saying." Said another mother, "I value our conversations at home!" The mother of another girl remarked, "I discuss things with my child."

Eight of the 69 adults used modeling to foster sunao in their children but three of them admitted that it is not easy for them to be sunao to their children all the time. The head teacher articulated, "I demonstrate my sunao feelings to children because if we want to foster sunao in them, we need to freely show them our sunao hearts." The professor's comments coincided with hers, "We need to openly demonstrate our sunao to children." Said one teacher, "I try to be sunao to my charges." The mother of a boy reported, "I try to be sunao myself, but it is not easy." The mother of a girl commented, "I tell my child that she needs to be sensitive to the feelings of others when playing with them. And I try to exemplify sunao because children grow by watching us, the parents."

Mothers and educators equally expressed the importance of praising children when they behave appropriately. "I praise my children even when they tell me they did something bad because in doing so, they are being sunao. I say to them, 'Thank you for telling me the truth. You are sunao...'" One mother remarked, "I praise my child when she does something good." The mother of a girl reported, "When my child is nice, I tell her how much I appreciate it and I express my joy to her." Another mother related, "I praise my child when he accomplishes something that he was unable to do before."

In sum, sunao is an attribute highly valued by the adults and is seen as a necessary virtue to be developed in children in order for them to become whole persons in Japan. The children understood that sunao is both a positive and negative concept, depending upon how it is used by adults, and children's expression of sunao

depends on their developmental stages. The adults in this study used several means to foster sunao in their children, including communication, modeling, and praise. Because the Japanese tend to regard sunao as one component of the whole person, we recommend that school-age children, their parents, and their teachers be included in future research.

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